

Iowa Outdoors
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
www.iowadnr.com

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Feb. 3, 2004

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DNR BATTLING YELLOW BASS PROBLEM IN SOUTHERN IOWA LAKES

DES MOINES – Iowa Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Gary Sobotka was shocked last spring when he collected a 13-inch yellow bass during a routine fish survey at Three Mile Lake. The reason for his alarm is that yellow bass have upset the fish populations in nine lakes in southwest Iowa making those lakes unattractive to anglers, and Three Mile Lake is one of the most popular fishing lakes in Iowa.

“There is at least 1,800 acres of water in southwest Iowa that have been negatively impacted because of yellow bass,” Sobotka said. “Our hope is to get some of those systems back on line within a couple of years, which means total renovation.”

An example of how yellow bass can impact a lake is underway at Twelve Mile Lake, near Creston.

“Three to four years ago, we would have 25 to 30 bass fishing tournaments at Twelve Mile Lake,” Sobotka said. “This year there is only one. The bass anglers know the situation at Twelve Mile and it’s not good. You can’t even fish for bluegills or use small bait because you can’t get past the yellow bass.”

Yellow bass is a small panfish that, once introduced to a lake, can completely take over the fish population within a few years. These fish are able to reproduce when they reach five to six inches and aggressively feed on the eggs of nest laying fish, like largemouth bass and bluegills. They will also eat the newly hatched larvae of those species as well as crappies.

“I have seen a school of yellow bass follow a female crappie and feed on her eggs as she deposits them,” said Chris Larson, fisheries biologist at Cold Springs, near Atlantic.

Yellow bass can get so numerous in a system that no other fish can grow. They negatively impact other species through competition or even direct predation. Yellows can get so thick, in fact, that the food in the system cannot support their own population, causing the yellow bass to become stunted, rarely getting to angler acceptable size of 8 inches.

Larson has seen first hand how yellow bass can destroy a lake. He eradicated the entire fish population at Lake Anita last fall to get rid of yellow bass. The lake has been restocked with largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie and channel catfish. Unfortunately, it will take a few years for the fish to grow large enough before anglers will return. Before yellow bass took over Lake Anita, the lake had an estimated impact of \$750,000 each year to the state and local economy.

“The only way I know how to manage yellow bass is at the bottom of a Rotenone barrel,” Larson said. “And you will basically lose your fishery for a couple of years.”

At Lake Icaria, largemouth bass are outnumbered 2,000 to 1. “At those numbers, largemouth bass can’t protect a nest to get a spawn off. Bluegills face the same problem,” Sobotka said. Sobotka has surveyed Icaria and estimates there are 392 largemouth bass, 668 walleye, 12,600 bluegill, and 784,000 yellow bass.

“Domination doesn’t do justice to describe what yellow bass do to these southern Iowa lakes,” Sobotka said. “It’s worse than domination.”

Sobotka and Larson have been talking with neighboring states to see what they are trying to address the yellow bass problem. Nebraska tried over-stocking largemouth bass in affected lakes and all they found was skinny largemouth bass and no impact on yellow bass.

Larson and Sobotka have studied predator species – largemouth bass, walleye, channel catfish – and although these fish are eating a few yellow bass, they are looking elsewhere for the primary food sources. A stomach analysis of more than 200 largemouth bass at Viking Lake this past summer revealed that largemouth bass do not feed effectively on yellow bass. In fact no, yellow bass were consumed by largemouth bass even though they are the dominant prey species in the lake.

Part of the problem may be that yellow bass and these predators do not frequent the same habitats in a lake. Another may be the spiny make up of the yellows. Or another may be the fish simply don’t like the taste of them. Whatever the reason is, predator stockings is not the answer.

So far, there is no solution other than total renovation.

“There are a lot of systems that maybe on the verge of crashing because of yellow bass,” Sobotka said. Bender Lake, near Corning, is one. So is the Afton City Reservoir. Other lakes include Viking, Manawa, and Arrowhead, in Pottawattamie County.

Larson has a special project underway involving walleye stockings at Viking Lake to help control the yellow bass, but he is not optimistic. “Twelve Mile has a good walleye population with lots of big fish, and it is still choked with yellow bass,” he said. He is also stocking wipers, a cross between the ocean striped bass and white bass, in Manawa to see if that species can have an impact. Wipers cannot reproduce in the wild.

“I know yellow bass are popular at Clear Lake, but in southern Iowa they are the top nuisance species – even above carp,” Larson said. “Clear Lake is really the exception to the rule when it comes to yellow bass populations, and in a majority of the years at Clear Lake, yellow bass have been too small to keep.”

Larson was horrified to hear reports of anglers using live yellow bass as bait for channel catfish. “That is a sure way for yellow bass to find their way into a new system.”

Iowa law makes it illegal to transport live fish from one public body of water to another, unless written permission is granted by the DNR.

“Please, by no means, transport these fish to other waterbodies,” Larson said. “You might think you are establishing another fishery, but are more likely leading that lake down the road to renovation.”

The DNR has already renovated Lake Anita and East Hackelbarney Lake because of an excessive yellow bass population. Plans are underway to renovate Lake Icaria, Binder Lake, and Old Corning Reservoir this fall. Renovating a lake to get rid of yellow bass is expensive and will impact local economies for up to three years and possibly longer.

Back at Three Mile Lake, Sobotka is keeping an extremely close eye on the fish population. He has surveyed the lake many times since finding that one yellow bass last spring using different methods and, so far, has not found another one. The economic impact Three Mile Lake has on local communities is in the millions of dollars each year. It is a destination lake drawing anglers from all over Iowa and surrounding states.

“I’m hoping it is the only yellow bass I ever find there,” he said.

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DNR TO PRESENT PLANS TO RENOVATE THREE LAKES NEAR CORNING

MT. AYR - Representatives of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Adams County Conservation Board, Corning Municipal Water, and others will present details of a plan to lower the Lake Icaria water level, and to renovate the fish populations of Lake Icaria, Binder Lake, and Old Corning Reservoir in the fall of 2004. The meeting will be held at the Corning Community Center at 7 p.m., Feb. 23. Current information about the existing fish populations, renovation options, and water usage will be presented by each agency and concerns of the public will be addressed.

Lake Icaria's fish community has degraded over the last few years. This change has substantially lowered camping, fishing, and recreational revenues at the lake. An over population of yellow bass compounded by extremely high common carp numbers have reduced desired game fish species significantly. Eliminating yellow bass and common carp from the lake, stabilizing the shoreline, and adding fish habitat will improve the lake's fish population. These efforts combined with the extensive soil conservation practices that have taken place in the watershed will further improve the lake's recreational opportunities and water quality.

Binder Lake also contains common carp and yellow bass. Fish sampling during 2003 indicated these fish had increased in numbers to a point that the sport fish were declining in both numbers and quality. A renovation of the fishery would reverse this condition.

Yellow bass have inhabited Old Corning Reservoir in the past. Since water can be pumped into Old Corning Reservoir from Lake Icaria or Binder Lake, fish or fish eggs could therefore be transported along with the pumped water. Possible yellow bass reintroduction into Lake Icaria or Binder Lake will be eliminated by their removal from Old Corning Reservoir

Detailed planning and coordination of activities between all vested agencies can improve water quality and eliminate undesirable fish species from Corning area lakes. The resulting improvements to the fishery and water quality will eventually bring more economic activity to the area.

For more information, contact Gary Sobotka, DNR fisheries biologist, at 641-464-3493.

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OAKS GALORE

AMES – The mighty oak is the official state tree of Iowa. Treasured for its stately growth, oaks offer beautiful lumber and its acorns are loved as a food source. Oaks native to Iowa woodlands include the bur, red, white, black and pin oaks.

According to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources forestry bureau chief John Walkowiak, oaks provide food and shelter to more than 78 species of Iowa wildlife. Squirrels, deer and turkey feast each fall and throughout the winter on acorns. Other wildlife species, including rabbits, raccoon and opossums, also eat substantial amounts of acorns. Even birds including quail, pheasant, blue jay, thrush, and the little nuthatch peck out the acorn meat.

A mature oak can produce more than 20 bushels of acorns in a good year, which occurs every three to five years. Not only animals and birds take advantage of the good years, the Department of Natural Resources State Forest Nursery buys more than 2,000 bushels of acorns.

After growing in the nursery, one million oak seedlings are ready for planting across the state. Some of the seedlings are planted on DNR parks, wildlife areas and state forests. Anyone with land to create a small forest can buy these seedlings for their own planting. Oak and other native species can be ordered from the State Forest Nursery. Call 1-800-865-2477 or by visit the website www.iowatreeplanting.com for more information. The minimum order is 500 seedlings, which may be used for wildlife habitat and reforestation plantings.

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PADDLEFISH SNAG-N-TAG

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Working our boat slowly, we steered around slabs of three-inch thick ice floating just below the Bellevue lock and dam. As snow hit the Mississippi River, the wind rolled it into white clouds of slush bobbing in the dark water. Not a picture perfect day for fishing. But the paddlefish wouldn't wait.

Well, not typical fishing. You snag paddlefish. They sift plankton from the water through their rakes. No bright lure or tasty bait for them. For another thing, we weren't here for recreation. Each fish caught would be returned to the water with a research tag embedded in its rostrum, or flat, spoon-shaped snout. Fisheries biologists want to know more about this throwback to the dinosaur era.

"We will check their ages, their growth; the size structure in the pool here. We want to see what sort of spawn a particular year might have," explains Denny Weiss, fisheries technician for the Department of Natural Resources and its Bellevue research

station. Each winter, fisheries workers spend days on the River-- here, Clinton and sometimes near Muscatine--snagging the leathery hides of these anything-but-ordinary looking creatures. Another Iowa crew snags on the Missouri River.

It's part the Mississippi Interstate Cooperation Resources Association (MICRA), a 23 state research program, coordinated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "If another state finds one of our tagged fish, they'll record that," says Weiss. "Paddlefish can travel great distances. We have caught several fish here that were tagged on the Wisconsin River, near Prairie du Sac. Over on the Missouri River, they have shown movement of 400 and 500 miles." Part of the focus is the impact of the lock and dam system on paddlefish migration. It regulates river flow—vital for flood protection—but also creates 'gates', restricting movement of paddlefish and other river species. Water quality and its effect on these ancient mariners is also studied.

On the depth finder, Weiss marked a school of spoonbills in an 80-foot hole, just below the rollers. With stiff poles, 20 pound line on our bait-casting reels and wicked looking treble hooks, he, fisheries technician Gene Jones and I got to work. There's not a lot of finesse involved; just bounce the half-pound weight off the bottom, then yank the line and hooks up through the water column. Not *quite* a needle in a haystack, but after a few dozen pulls, I realized why they let me to come along. Three backs are better than two.

It took a good half hour before the first snag. It felt like a log had just attached itself to my line. While I reeled it up, Jones reached into the icy water to haul it on board. Ironically, I had snagged it in the corner of its mouth. "You must know how to thread that plankton on the hook better than us," Weiss joked. He and Jones quickly weighed it (about nine pounds), measured the length between the fork of the tail and the beady little eye and assessed its overall health.

Waving an airport security type wand over the bill, we listened for the telltale beep of an embedded metal tag. None on this one, so Weiss implanted one before releasing it. The ID number on the wire tag is recorded. If the fish is recaptured, that number tells researchers its movement, growth rate and other secrets of the deep.

With the hot spot located, it only took a couple hours to haul up ten more for this afternoon snag-and-tag. A 19 pounder (their largest this year was 40) stretching more than 50 inches from snout to tail made the boat a little crowded, but the rest scaled down from there. We even saw a little one-pounder. That was just fine with Weiss, too. "Fishermen might like to see the 30, 40, 50 pounders, but it's better to see a lot of the one and two pounders; the five to eight pounders. It shows good spawns; young fish coming on."

That mirrors what he has seen since coming to Bellevue in the early '80s. Commercial fishing for paddlefish is now closed and recreational fishing is restricted to two fish per day, during a specific season. "I would see a lot of fish then in the 15 to 40 pound range," says Weiss. "Anglers were snagging them by the boatload. But we never

saw any three, four or five pounders.” He wonders if heavy fishing might have affected spawning success.

Over the ten years of the MICRA project, though, they have seen good reproduction, though little is still known about the paddlefish spawn. That might be one thing upon which MICRA sheds some light, as biologists try to learn more about this ancient fish and how the current environment is affecting it.

But it’s still the ugliest thing you’re going to see coming out of the water...anywhere.

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IOWA FISHING REPORT

For the week of February 3, 2004

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Ice conditions continue to vary greatly across the state.

Northwest

Spirit Lake (Dickinson): Caution: There is still some open water around the lake so extreme caution is recommended if you choose to drive on the ice. Yellow perch fishing has been kind of slow with some fish being caught on the east side of the lake on both sides of Big Stoney Point. Anglers are catching perch on minnows and wigglers attached to pilkees and jigs. Walleye anglers are targeting areas way out from Marble Beach and along Reeds Run on the east side. There is also some action on the north end by Crandalls Beach, Big Stoney, and Mini-Wakan State Park. Anglers are using jigging raps, kastmasters, and other lures tipped with minnows, minnow heads, or perch eyes, when available. Out from Anglers Bay Resort is a great place for crappies and a few bluegills, but the perch have seemed to slow down quite a bit. The North Grade has a few crappies and bluegills being caught along the weed lines. Wax worms and smaller jigs seem to be the bait of choice, with some anglers using minnows for the crappie.

West Okoboji (Dickinson): Crappie and bluegills are being caught in Miller's and Smith's bay with most people using wax worms. Yellow perch are being caught in about 50 feet of water in Hayward's Bay. Using an electronic fish locator will help to find the depth where the fish are suspended. There is also some perch being caught in Millers Bay in about 15 to 20 feet of water. Northern pike are being caught in Smith's, Miller's, and Emerson bays, and at the north end. The preferred bait for pike is chubs.

Five Island (Palo Alto): Walleyes being caught on the north end of the third island late in the evening and into the night. Some crappies are being caught between the first island and the trestle.

Silver Lake (Palo Alto): Anglers having some luck on the south end of the lake for yellow perch and northern pike.

Lake Pahoja (Lyon): Lots of smaller bluegills are being caught, along with a few Channel Catfish, using small jigs tipped with a wax worm.

Dog Creek (O'Brien): Anglers are catching a few black crappies in the evenings.

Black Hawk Lake (Sac): Crappie and yellow bass fishing is fairly good.

Arrowhead Lake (Sac): Good for 7 - 8 inch bluegill.

Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo): Yellow bass fishing is fair. Yellows are being caught around the Island and Billy's Reef. Use minnows and jigging spoons for the best action.

Little Wall Lake (Hamilton): Crappies are being caught in the dredged area. Use minnows and wax worms on small spoons.

Rice Lake (Winnebago/Worth): Yellow perch are hitting minnows and small jigs. Many of the perch are small, so sorting is required. A few northern pike in the 2 to 5-pound range are being caught while fishing for perch.

Silver Lake (Worth): Yellow perch fishing is fair. Use small minnows and jigs for bait. Sorting is required to get larger fish.

For more information on fishing in northwest Iowa, call the regional office in Spirit Lake at (712) 336-1840.

Southwest

In southwest Iowa there is heavy snow cover on all lakes and ponds.

Big Creek (Polk): Anglers report bluegill fishing is fair to good during the day using teardrops and wax worms in the Lost Lake area near the spillway. Crappie fishing has been good late in the day in the Lost Lake area and in the main lake in deeper water using rocker jigs and minnows.

Lake Ahquabi (Warren): Bluegill and crappie fishing is slow to fair.

Don Williams (Boone): Crappie fishing has been good. Try along the eastern part of the lake in the afternoon. Some bluegills are reported, although fishing has been slow.

Hickory Grove (Story): Bluegill fishing has picked up and anglers are reporting some fair to good fishing.

Lake Red Rock (Marion): Anglers report walleye fishing in the tailwater of the dam has picked up. Try twister tails and jigs.

Farm ponds: Note: anglers need permission to fish on private ponds. Fishing is good for bluegill and crappies on area ponds. Ice thickness varies from 3 to 8 inches.

Viking (Montgomery): Ice thickness varies from 6 to 9 inches. Anglers are catching small bluegills. Fishing is better toward evening.

Greenfield (Adair): Ice thickness varies from 5 to 7 inches. There are three areas of open water: at end of fishing jetty north of boat ramp, boat ramp, and around northeast shoreline. Use caution and check ice thickness and conditions often, avoid areas near open water. Anglers were catching 6 to 8-inch bluegills.

Mormon Trail (Adair): Ice thickness varies from 5 to 7 inches. Use caution, check ice thickness and conditions often. Anglers were catching 7 to 9-inch bluegills, and sorting out the smaller fish.

Willow Lake (Harrison): Ice thickness is 8 inches. Anglers are catching a few bluegills, with better fishing toward evening.

Farm Creek Lake (Montgomery): Ice thickness varies from 6 to 8 inches. Fishing is excellent for bluegills.

Anderson Area North Pond (Montgomery): Ice thickness is 8 inches. Fishing is good for bluegills in front of the dam.

DeSoto Bend (Harrison): Ice varies from 3 to 8 inches. Anglers are catching crappies and bluegills around structure at the south end of the lake.

Prairie Rose (Shelby): Ice thickness varies from 3 to 7 inches. Anglers are catching catfish, small bluegill and crappies. The best place is around brush piles.

Three Mile (Union): Ice varies from 8 to 12 inches. Fishing is good to excellent for bluegill and crappies in the upper end. Walleye fishing is good on the rock piles and on old roadbed.

Twelve Mile (Union): Fishing is good for walleyes and crappies.

Green Valley (Union): Ice thickness varies from 6 to 10 inches. Some bluegill and crappies are being caught.

Badger Creek (Madison): Fishing is very good for 7 to 8-inch bluegills.

Criss Cove (Madison) and the smaller county board areas are good for crappie and bluegill.

Icaria (Adams): Anglers are catching channel catfish.

Fogle (Ringgold): Good ice and good fishing for lots of bluegills and crappies.

Slip Bluff (Decatur), **Windmill** (Taylor) and **Wilson** (Taylor) are good for bluegill and crappie. Ice thickness varies from 7 to 12 inches.

Walnut Creek Marsh (Ringgold): Fishing is good for bluegill and some crappies.

Little River (Decatur): Fishing is good for bluegill and crappies.

For more information on fishing in southwest Iowa, contact the regional office in Lewis at (712) 769-2587.

Southeast

Mississippi River Pools 16 to 19: Ice thickness varies from 5 to 6 inches on most backwater areas. Anglers are reporting fair to good fishing for bluegills and slow to fair fishing for crappies in Big Timber and Bell's Pocket.

Lake Odessa (Louisa): Bluegill fishing has slowed. Anglers are still catching some nice fish in Sand Run.

Lake Geode (Henry): Anglers are catching a few nice bluegills, but the action is not fast and furious. Late afternoon seems to be the best time. If the fish aren't biting there are still about 2,000 geese to watch.

Lake Darling (Washington): Not much fishing activity last week due to the sub-zero temperatures.

Lake Belva Deer (Keokuk): The ice by the dam is still not safe and the ice thickness is highly variable in the rest of the lake. Use extreme caution. A few bluegills are being caught in 15 to 20 feet of water on small jigs fished over habitat.

Lake Rathbun (Appanoose): Crappies have been biting on minnows and jigging lures. Fishing has picked up in the Atwell's and South Fork areas of the lake. Crappie fishing continues to be good at Honey Creek boat ramp and Buck Creek.

Lake Wapello (Davis): Ice conditions remain extremely variable with some open water areas. Use caution if venturing onto the ice and test for thickness regularly.

Lake Miami (Monroe): Bluegills have been biting on jigs tipped with a wax worm. Early mornings and late evenings remain the most productive times.

Lake Sugema (Van Buren): Bluegills have been biting on teardrop jigs tipped with a wax worm. An occasional crappie has been caught using minnows.

Coralville Reservoir (Johnson): Fishing has been slow for crappies. Crappies have been caught throughout the reservoir around the rock walls and brush piles.

Lake Macbride (Johnson): Anglers should be aware of poor ice conditions near the dam and Causeway Bridge area on the south arm. Fishing has been slow to fair with the best fishing in the early morning and just before and after dark for crappies around brush piles. Some decent bluegills have been caught, although sorting is required for sizeable fish.

Hannan Lake (Benton): Bluegill fishing has been fair using jigs tipped with wax worms. Some sorting is required for sizeable fish with best fishing in the morning and evening hours. Anglers are reminded that minnow usage is prohibited.

Lake Iowa (Iowa): Fishing has been fair for bluegills and crappies around brush piles in the late afternoon and evening using jigs tipped with wax worms.

Diamond Lake (Poweshiek): Fishing has been fair for crappie and bluegill using jigs tipped with wax worms around brush piles. Anglers are reminded that minnow usage is prohibited.

Pleasant Creek (Linn): Fishing has been fair for perch around the dam. Anglers have caught a few bluegill and crappie.

Farm ponds: Fishing has been fair for bluegills on jigs tipped with wax worms.

For more information on fishing in southeast Iowa, call the regional office in Brighton at (319) 694-2430.

Northeast

Mississippi River Pools 9 to 15: Fishing on the River has slowed. At **Bussey Lake** on Pool 10, anglers are catching a few crappies, bluegill and perch. Pool 12 a few fish are being caught in **Kehough** and **Fishtrap**. Pool 13 **Browns Lake** has been slow, and most people are reporting small fish. The lower end of Browns Lake still seems to be producing the best. **Green Island** complex they were catching a few crappie and bluegill in **Sawmill**. Don't forget, to fish Green Island, you must have an Iowa fishing license. Anglers are catching a few crappies and bluegill at **Spring Lake**. **Michelsons**, early morning and late afternoon, seem to be fair for bluegill and crappie. Fishing at **Middle** and **Lower Sabula** lakes is slow, but anglers are still catching bluegill, crappie and yellow perch (Middle Lake). In Pool 14 at **Rock Creek**, the early bite still seems to be the best for crappie.

For information on fishing in northeast Iowa, call the regional office in Manchester at (563) 927-3276.

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